

Sunday, November 8, 2020
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
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Assisting Bishop

Five days after the election, now what? How then shall we live? How can we rediscover how to become The UNITED States of America? Having gone through this long – often acrimonious – divisive political campaign, how shall we live together as a United States now? And what is our role as the Church to be an instrument of communion?

Remember our mission is stated in the Catechism: The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. All people – All – Republicans and Democrats. Those who are happy today and those who are in despair – All.

I want to talk about this task by looking at the reading from Joshua. Let's locate ourselves. After leading the Israelites through the Red Sea and the desert for decades, Moses is not able to actually get to the Promised Land. Instead it is Joshua. But there's a necessary step the Israelites must take before they can get across the River Jordan. The step is, they must choose whom they will serve, which means they must make a covenant in how they will live. Because if they do not serve YHWH, if they do not again commit to God's covenant, they will bring the old world with them and their old ways of seeing. New land requires new behavior sealed by a new covenant. Remember what Joshua says? Choose this day whom you will serve – the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living, or the Lord. You can't live in the New World with your old patterns or old behavior or old ways of mapping the world.

Every election brings a New World one way or another, and it means as a nation we have a fundamental reorientation. We leave our old ways on the wilderness side of the river and we take on new ways on the far side. This transition is hard – indeed, Joshua tells the people, “You cannot serve the Lord, for YHWY is a holy God... If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign Gods, then YHWY will do you harm.” A new land demands a new orientation and a new way of being community. We have to let go of all that we were taught in Egypt – the division, the suspicion of one another, the constant strife. We let go of our sense of who is to blame. We turn our backs on the foreign Gods that kept us in bondage in Egypt, and instead we incline our hearts towards the Lord. And we let go of our old ways and embrace the Way of the Lord because when we cross the river, we put the past behind us.

As we approached the election on Tuesday, I thought about this text, and I think of it now in this post-election. What came to me is that this is our moment as the Church, because we are in the communion business. Remember our calling? To restore all people to unity.

Let's remember that when Paul commanded the early followers of Jesus, he told them to put away the works of the flesh – strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy – and instead to embrace the works of the Spirit – which include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What if we used those two

sets of characteristics to think about our calling today? What if Joshua is speaking to us – saying, “Choose this day whom you will serve – the Gods of strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, – or the Lord, which calls you to walk in the Way of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And it’s hard. It’s hard now as it was hard back in Joshua’s day. Joshua says to the people “You cannot serve the Lord because the Lord is a holy God.” And when the people continue to argue that they can, Joshua says to them, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord to serve him.” And so are we. We chose to follow Jesus and act as he commands us in baptism. We were raised into the new life of Grace and sent into the world in witness to God’s love. To be a witness isn’t Episcopal Polite – it’s to be an active agent of unity.

Let me give you an image of what this witness might look like. In the 15th Century, the Ormond’s and the Kildares were locked in bitter conflict.¹ The two clans fought – and the bloodletting inflamed their hatred of one another. One battle led to another, until finally the Kildares got the upper hand and threatened to annihilate the Ormonds. In desperation the leaders of the Ormond clan went inside the chapter house of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and locked themselves in to escape being killed. For weeks, the Kildares surrounded the place and laid siege.

But one day, the Earl of Kildare came to himself. He remembered the WAY and he walked up to the Chapter House door and shouted for the Ormonds to open the door and come out and find peace together. There was no response from inside. He banged on the door – still silence. Then with his sword, “he gouged a hole through the wood of the great door.” He knew that the Ormonds each had swords, and he also knew that only by placing his life of the Truth and the Way and the Life would he ever be an instrument of peace. And so, he stuck his arm through the hole. For a moment the world hung in the balance. And then his hand was grasped by the Earl of Ormond. The door swung open and the feud ended. And those gathered that day knew the peace that surpasses all understanding.

My brothers and sisters – we have left the wilderness and we have left Egypt. In our baptism we have crossed the River. If we are to live in the promised land, we must embrace our promises as well. We are not to live by the rule of the Empire – of Pharaoh – but by the commandments of our Lord Jesus to love one another. This is our moment as the Church. Let us cut through the walls and fences of division and disunity and discord. Let us extend the hand of friendship with no assurance of how it will be received. It is so easy to split apart and so hard to mend. It is so easy to separate and so hard to unite. And it is so easy to judge and so hard to love. But, we are called to follow the one who is always mending and uniting and loving the world into communion.

And in this moment, we are called to do so in his name.

¹ Story told by Br. Geoffrey Tristram SSJE on St. Patrick’s Day, March 17, 2007, at the House of Bishop’s meeting.